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ABSTRACT

Although the roots of phototherapy extend back to the late 1850's, it did not emerge as a distinct entity until the late 1970's. Growing interest has generated a substantial body of literature in the field. While photographs may be looked at concretely, as two-dimensional, their symbolic and metamorphic nature is a potentially powerful tool in psychotherapy. A client's willingness to bring and discuss photos in the therapy session can be viewed as a metamorphic statement regarding trust and willingness to be involved in therapy. The selection of photos conveys the way a client organizes and presents his/her world. The client's choice of events and symbols in the photographs can bring to awareness that which formerly took place at an unconscious level. The therapist, actively working with the many aspects of the client's visual metaphor and encouraging the exploration of the boundaries of vision, brings about a changed world view. The evolved perception and vision enlarges the client's ability to view the world and to create his/her place in it. (JAC)

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INSIGHT AND OUTLOOK:

SYMBOL AND METAPHOR IN PHOTOTHERAPY

Paper presented to the National Convention
of the American Psychological Association

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ABSTRACT

Growing interest in phototherapy has generated a substantial body of literature in the field. This paper briefly addresses the heretofore largely undiscussed area of a major underlying assumption of this approach; the symbolic and metaphoric nature of photographs which allows them to be such potentially powerful tools in psychotherapy. This paper 1) considers the similarity of dream symbols and photographs, 2) considers the making of photographs as analogous to other meaning-making activities, 3) considers client selection, presentation and discussion of photographs as a metaphor for their style of "being in the world," and 4) considers the symbolic pictoral information in photographs as having the ability to cause client change when presented as an appropriate intervention.

Although the roots of phototherapy extend back to the late 1850's, it was not until the late 1970's that phototherapy emerged as a distinct entity. Through the efforts of psychotherapists to find new and efficient techniques for working with clients, a substantial and growing body of literature has emerged. This literature has been reviewed by various authors (Fryrear 1980; Krauss 1979; Loellbach 1978; Stewart 1980), and approaches, techniques and results have been delineated. These reviews of the literature have helped to define the parameters of this approach in various treatment settings and have raised new issues concerning research and clinical application. To date, essentially all the collected writings in phototherapy have been "what" or "how to" articles, helping to define phototherapy and putting forth specific techniques with which to work. We have been told that phototherapy can be defined as the systematic use of photographic materials in the helping relationship to effect client change in the areas of thinking and/or feelings and/or behaving.

We have seen that photography has been used with widely divergent populations and in widely divergent settings. Phototherapy techniques have been used effectively with normal young people in elementary school, chronic schizophrenics in state mental hospitals, and a number of different populations between these two extremes. Photos have been used in family, group, and individual therapy as ways of gaining information about the past and present. Client's photographs show relationships, contexts and the dynamics of peoples' lives. Additionally, phototherapy can be used to develop skills in perceiving, feeling, thinking, behaving and communicating.

The purpose of this article is to briefly present the reader with some of the assumptions which form the foundation of the varied techniques which we call phototherapy. It focuses on metaphor and its implications for the therapeutic

relationship. This is, therefore, a "why" article designed to bring the underlying assumptions to light and to illuminate and develop the visual metaphor itself.

In order to understand the visual metaphor, we must first consider photographs, especially those of the snapshot or personal variety. These photographs may be looked at concretely as two-dimensional, graphic representations of three-dimensional events which have occurred in time, arrived at by use of camera and film. They show us what an event looked like at a certain moment, from a certain angle and distance, at a certain lens opening and shutter speed, using certain camera and film. This film is then printed in a certain way to create a graphic symbolic representation. Today's technology allows most of us to simply point our cameras and shoot, so that we have little concern or awareness or involvement with these discreet processes. Most of us are happy if the photographic content appears to a good likeness to that which we hoped to portray, i.e. a fair example of our visual syntax.

Like other forms of visual perceptual organization, looking at photographs is an active, meaning-making event requiring assumptions and decisions based on renaissance perspective. When we view a personal photograph we say that the people represented in the image "are our family". As we focus on the content of the photographic image we project a "depth of field", which allows us to "know" that the house is in the background and the people are in the foreground. Without the training and benefit of being able to use the renaissance perspective we would most likely have a difficult time making the image make sense. This often happens in cultures without the benefit of renaissance perspective and for most people when they view abstract images, images from novel perspectives, and extreme close-ups or macro-photographs. Every photograph is and represents an organization of experience.

Even when we look at the most common of snapshots our perceptual mechanisms creatively "filter" stimuli through our experience, needs and expectations. We selectively disregard certain aspects of the object and change others so that the photograph can make sense, to fit into the frame of a personal cognitive map of reality. Looking at photographs is a process not unsimilar to responding to a Rorschach inkblot.

Our photographs are personal symbols which have the energy to demonstrate the dynamic power of our lives. They are symbols, icons, totems, or artifacts which allow us to reconnect with the past in the present. They are not only of something (the picture of our family), they are also about something (what the data in the photo implies regarding my relationship with the family, and/or what can be elicited through discussion). They are symbols amenable to investigation.

From the very beginnings of psychotherapy, practitioners such as Jung and Freud studied the symbolic content of dreams and free associations. As a result, there evolved the understanding that the patients' personal symbols were potent metaphors for their concerns and their present states of being. Freud further noted that visual symbols are a much truer (more useful) account of a person's concerns and processes than were verbal reports because our constant fimilarity with words and their conscious combinations in sentences are more knowable and more highly defended (filtered) than our more "primitive" visual processes. It is most likely that if Freud and Jung were alive today, they would use photographs like dreams and free association to access the murky workings of unconscious process.

The symbolic and metaphoric quality of photographs can be elicited from photos made in the past (like dreams) as well as those made in the present (like free association). The client's choice of events and symbols in the

photograph and the ensuing therapeutic interventions can bring to awareness that which formerly took place at a primarily unconscious level. (Perhaps most picture making, as a process removed from "normal" awareness, is altered perception like hypnosis or dreams. That is to say that when we look through a viewfinder we alter our consciousness, we symbolically remove ourselves from the event and become visually involved as directors and/or observers.)

The process of therapy like that of photography involves a change in awareness and behavior. It seeks to refocus feelings, thoughts and behaviors. It seeks to create greater insight and a more whole outlook. It seeks to aid people in their search for functionally creative and adaptive responses to the questions raised by living.

One response people have to living is to document their experiences in photographs. Taken as a whole these images are a vast source of information for therapists beyond the factual data of the who, what, where and when of the image. Looking at photographs with others is considered a relatively non-threatening and socially acceptable behavior. Psychotherapists who use photo-therapy techniques often ask their clients to bring photographs to the session as a way to learn more about them. A client's initial willingness to bring and discuss photos can be viewed as a metaphoric statement regarding trust and willingness to be involved in the therapeutic process. Clients who bring in one or two carefully selected images may symbolically be making quite different statements than those clients who bring in the album or those clients who dump a couple of shoeboxes full of pictures on the desk. Additionally, the photographs convey the way the client chooses to organize and present their world. As the therapist views the photographs, he or she learns about the client's world; the point of view, clarity of vision and depth of field. Themes of focus and range of subject matter emerge, all of which present a metaphor for norms and rules for experiencing; i.e. that which the client chooses to see and that which the

client may be blind to. In the process of discussing these photographs with the client, the therapist learns about the client's style of interaction and how their interests, as indicated in the images, symbolically define them. In asking clients to bring in photographs and in the subsequent viewing and discussion the therapist can quickly develop a relatively comprehensive picture of the client's way of being in the world, and thus create a baseline from which to measure change.

Even more fundamentally, the profound power of photographic images to function metaphorically as catalysts to insight and understanding can be demonstrated from the following two short examples where personal photographs were allowed to speak for themselves. I had the opportunity to work with a divorced woman who was willing to look at her family photos. What we saw in the images made by her husband was that he had a hard time facing and making visual contact with her. He would only photograph her obliquely or "on a pedestal" where she was somehow above him. He also would not photograph herat close range, prefering some distance. This behavior changed when he photographed their young child. He would make images at much closer range, often eliminating the mother's head or other parts of her body but always including the child. Reviewing these images for her was an experience of understanding in a new way some of the problems and dynamics of the relationship that had been there pictorally since courtship. Her ability to see this information in the photographs allowed her to feel better and to resolve emotionally some things she knew intellectually. Discussing these photos was an affirmation for her.

Another woman who was a therapist herself asked me to go over her photos so that she could see first hand how phototherapy might be used with clients. She had a fairly large number of snapshots, and I asked her to select a few that were the most important to her. She proceeded to choose about fifteen or twenty.

I spread then out on the table before us and started asking questions about the images while I looked for themes. Two images caught my attention. One was of her mother and herself at the kitchen table in mother's house. Mother was seated and P. was behind her mother in a position where she had her arm around mother's shoulder and her head next to mother's -- a look which she later described as "loving, nurturing, and taking care of." In a second photograph she assumed what appeared to me to be a similar posture on a living room chair with a (now former) lover. When I moved the other photographs aside and presented these two to her side by side, she put her palm to her forehead and had what we refer to in therapy as an aha! experience. She said that a number of things suddenly made sense to her and proceeded to elaborate on this experience. In this case the metaphor created by presentation of the two images side by side was enough to create a powerful discovery for this woman around her personal issues of independence, nurturance and dependence. These two cases illustrate two ways in which we commonally use the visual metaphor in therapy: to show some new reality visually by the discussion and positioning of photos, and to make clear the concerns or themes which a client is at least partially blind to.

This paper has briefly considered the visual, and the various ways photographic images may function as symbol and metaphor. It has attempted to demonstrate the potency and primacy of the visual image in our search for understanding the world, and how the power inherent in visuals can be utilized in therapy. By actively working with the many aspects of the visual metaphor and encouraging clients to explore the boundries of their vision, and to gain insight, the client and their picture of the world changes. The evolved perception and vision enlarges the client's ability to view the world and to create their place in it.

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